

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

MOMENTS IN BETWEEN: SHORT STORIES

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SPRING 2015

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Creative Writing
with honors in Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

This is a creative thesis containing a critical preface and a portfolio of fiction writing consisting of five short stories.

The critical preface examines the process of writing each story in the portfolio, as well as background on some of the characters. The critical preface also explores the focus of each story. Some stories focus on depression, others on the loss of a loved one, and also on family dynamics. Each story has a different subject matter, but they all explore the moments we have in between life changes in some way. "Letters From Ivy" deals with the loss of a best friend to suicide. "A Real Family Affair" follows a family through a change in dynamic. "660,001" deals with the loss of a family member to disease and a struggle of religious identity. "Confession" explores suicide and its affect on family members. Finally, "Blade" follows a woman who has started carrying a knife.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	iii
LIST OF TABLES	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	V
Chapter 1 Critical Preface	1
Chapter 2 A Real Family Affair	8
Chapter 3 660,001	18
Chapter 4 Confession	29
Chapter 5 Blade	36
Chapter 6 Letters From Ivy	43
ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY	64

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my mum, my dad, and my sister, who have always affected everything I do, and so have no doubt influenced my writing; My thesis adviser, Dr. Tom Noyes for putting up with my sporadic submissions this year as my brain put up a wall to its creative side; Vee Butler, for the idea that spawned “A Real Family Affair,” when I was absolutely out of ideas; all the professors I’ve had the pleasure of learning from, whose encouragement, insight, and advice about writing I will continue to reference as long as I write;

Chapter 1

Critical Preface

“Art is a form of supremely delicate awareness and atonement – meaning at-oneness, the state of being at one with the object.” *-D.H. Lawrence*

Every major artist has a specific way of creating. Someone can look at a painting and know that Vincent Van Gogh or Henri Matisse painted it, not because every single painting they made looks the same, but because of their style. Fiction is the same way because of a connection between the author and the story. While these are not true stories and most of them are not related to me, they are all part of me in that they came from my brain and as I wrote each one, I was shaped as a writer and as a person.

In “Making Pictures,” D.H. Lawrence ends with a quote that fits this collection, “No artist, even the gloomiest, ever painted a picture without the curious delight in image-making” (63). People often ask me what it is that I like to write, asking for a better explanation than the wide expanse of, “Stories.” My answer attempts to capture the grim nature of so many of the things that I write, while also being true to the voice of my characters, which isn’t always as melodramatic as their situations may be. My thoughts behind this approach to drama and to death stem from my experiences in real life. Dealing with depression is never easy, but it definitely isn’t always dark skies and tears. Some days, I can have a great day or I can tell jokes and have a laugh with friends. Sad moments happen in life, but they don’t mean someone has to be sad forever, and that is something I like to capture in my writing.

The stories in *Moments* follow characters that are in between changes in their lives. Each story deals with a different subject matter, the characters are all in some way in between.

The first story, “A Real Family Affair,” was originally meant to focus on the grandfather. His choice to go back to work in a field he’d never worked in before, his transition, his ultimate happiness. I decided to focus on a family member, and I chose this character’s granddaughter. In order to keep the grandfather’s transition a part of the story, I added a deep relationship between Hannah and Gramps. In earlier drafts, the lake that Hannah’s grandparents and their friends were swimming in was genuinely just a lake. Through revision, I added some hints at something supernatural happening to them as they entered this lake. This change was different for me, because I don’t often write stories about supernatural things, but it was interesting to try to keep my personal tone of writing, and still adding that aspect to the story. In “Before Paris and After,” Julian Levi states that he is “seeking an integration between the tired experienced eye and the childlike simple perception” (56). That is more a task for the reader in the essay. In any creative process, there needs to be a blending of these two types of perception. When writing about childhood, we must try to capture the mind of a child while incorporating the wisdom of our older selves. When making an argument, there is that base perception that can be simple, and the complex undertones that we need that experienced eye to help explain. The childlike simple perception cannot stand on its own, because it will seem hollow. There won’t be enough in the product for any audience to understand or seek meaning from. The tired, experience eye cannot stand alone or it will compare something to death. Any time we are confronted with something new, we try to make sense of it by comparing it to something else, something we do understand. We used our tired, experienced eye to turn new things into old

things. However, if we are attempting to create something, that becomes a dangerous habit if we are constantly appropriating new things into old, boring things. We need that childlike simple perception to make our creations new and interesting. That simple perception can help to create something awe-inspiring out of something ordinary. In “A Real Family Affair,” I gave that task to my characters. Gramps and Nana have kind of seen it all. They have their families, they are getting to a stage of life where they are over it. Hannah is entering a new stage in her life. The same stage of which her parents are nearing the end. The adults in the story have been stuck in their ways for so long, that they have begun to appropriate new things and make them boring. When Gramps announces the move to Kentucky, the adults are concerned for the house and the logistics of the move. These are things that Hannah and her younger cousins have not thought about, because they still see the world in their childlike way. Gramps and Nana use the fountain of youth to regain their innocence and have a better relationship with the world and creation. Hannah is in between both perceptions of the world and her interactions with her grandparents and their fountain of youth will influence her to go a different path than the rest of the family, steering clear of that dangerous habit adults fall into.

The next story, “660,001,” was an interesting one to write. I started off only loosely referencing Nigeria in the story, not wanting it to be a story about Africa, but one about religion. I thought that putting the country in there would divert reader’s attention from the main focus. I changed this after reading *The Thing Around Your Neck*, a collection of short stories by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. She has always been an influence in my life and reading this book influenced my writing a lot, but more of my nonfiction side, which is not included in this thesis. Reading that collection made me more comfortable with mentioning the country that I was

picturing in my head in the story, rather than making it very ambiguous and raising the question of what country the story took place in.

In Isadora Duncan's essay, "The Mother Cry of Creation," she explores the creation of her art, dance. She notes that her movements are an expression of the truth of her being. She speaks of the public as her audience saying, "Before the public which has thronged my representations I have had no hesitation. I have given them the most secret impulses of my soul" (207). This concept is familiar to my writing, as it all seems to come from some corner of my mind, but it is painfully evident in "Confession." Humans are "fallible creatures that we are and being ourselves in question, we inevitably demand answers to ease the lack within us. All things must be capable of explanation, every effect must have a cause, each problem a solution" (Travers 41). Sophie is a character looking for answers to her problems. She is trying to ease the lack within her and so she demands answers in the form of telling her family she is suicidal. She goes to her oldest known resource for help with her situation. She does what anyone would when they were trying to find out how to get help for any problem they have, small or life threatening. Unfortunately for Sophie, her family does not have answers, instead they meet her with more questions, adding to that lack within her.

Like Travers, I am often asked where my ideas come from. Usually it is something someone has said, or an overheard conversation that sets off a fire of fiction in my mind. "Confession" came from a real life experience. I exaggerated the scenario just a bit, but not much. So much dialogue from my stories is an attempt at me being true to the world as I see it and the conversations that I believe people have. I try to capture the real rhythm of human interaction in everything that I write. However, "Confession" was originally deemed too extreme by some of the people who read it. I chose not to dilute that family tension and the family's

insensitivity toward Sophie because that is a situation that happens in the households you would never guess. Writing a story so close to home proved incredibly difficult, and in creating the first draft of this story, I encountered my first case of writer's block.

Writer's block is normal. Even Yeats' experienced it, and in turn wrote "The Circus Animals' Desertion." In that poem, the speaker, an experienced and talented writer, sits down to write a poem and cannot come up with anything for weeks. It is then that the speaker of the poem decides that the old inspirations for poetry will not work for this next poem. He decides to start over and stop using illusions to write about basic human emotion. While I am not quite on Yeats' level, I decided to write something else, and that's how I came to write the next story in *Moments*: "Blade."

Being a girl who works in construction, it is common for me to have a knife. But I found that some of my city friends and even some of my friends from the suburbs also carried random pocketknives. None of them have ever used it, but they like to talk about the fact that they own one. I wanted to help them find a reason to use them, and that is why I started writing "Blade." The story started off with a tone of female empowerment, the protagonist buying the knife because she wanted it, whether or not it was feminine. But I strayed from that path and made it more about the importance of a carrying a knife. It's not something I think about often, but it was interesting that so many people could be carrying blades in their pockets for no reason. It is normal for men to carry one, but not women, even though neither gender really has any use for a blade on a normal day. I tried to keep the tone of this story light as a contrast to other stories in the collection.

The final story in the collection is the first one I wrote. I began with the first scene of Olive in the classroom giving her presentation and ended with her on the roof of the school. I

quickly gave this character a life of her own with her sad past conflicting with her regular teenage life. The story quickly started to spiral out of control as a lot of characters gained importance and began to fight for the spotlight. I decided that I needed a direction, and then I added in the letter concept and explored the feelings Olive has as she slowly regresses back through the stages of grief. Adding focus to something creative helps it to express a message of some sort, whatever the artist decides. My only issue with this is that it is difficult to actually express that creative process. Once I added a sense of control to this story, it grew. Control is often frowned upon and rebelled against. Most people seem to have a million excuses to why something is fragmented when in reality, they just didn't add in any direction to the essay or lost control of their creative piece, and then must defend a work that is too abstract for its own good. It is an interesting dilemma we face; needing freedom to formulate and fertilize our eccentric ideas and concepts, while at the same time being sure to control our eccentricity in order to make sure that our end product in the creative process is something good.

Chapter 2

A Real Family Affair

I stand on the side of the blue lake and slowly raise my sunglasses from my eyes. I squint as the reflection of the sun on the water hits my eyes. The whole park smells fresh. Any human scent is immediately absorbed by the natural Febreeze that is the Yatesville Lake air. On one side of the lake are small docks next to picnic sites with little grills for burgers and enough benches to fully accommodate the largest family reunions. On the other side of the lake is a wall of trees. There is the smallest bit of sand around them, enough to catch a deer or another animal but not a human, fundamentally unable to navigate such a small, anti-tourist patch of sand. I walk back to my car, taking the gravel road back to the parking lot. The road is made for people to take their cars right up to the lake, but I'd chose not to, not wanting to disrupt this place. I get back to my car just as I get a text from Nana. It's time for me to meet up with my grandparents at their new post.

Last year, my grandfather came out of retirement to become a park ranger in Eastern Kentucky. There were no real hints that this kind of thing would happen. We had gathered at their small house in Charlottesville for Thanksgiving and in the middle of my 6-year old cousin blessing the meal - in his defense, she had been rambling about being thankful for her toys for far too long - he interrupted to share this news with all of us. A chorus of "What's" and "Why's" escaped just about every mouth around the table but mine.

I wasn't really paying attention to any of the insanely ambiguous answers he was giving to the adults in my family. I just kept looking from him to my Nana. Her face showed no

sign of any feelings. I assumed he'd told her this before he told the rest of us. Common courtesy. She had taken her seat, finished with our questions and was ready to eat. When my Aunt Margie, the most hysterical of my dad's siblings, asked if my grandpa had lost his "ever-loving mind," Nana burst out laughing. It was a weird enough response from her that it seemed to calm everyone down. Gramps just shrugged and grinned, laughing his old hearty laugh that shook his shoulders and then his big belly.

"Why didn't you choose a park in Virginia?" This was my Dad, always shocked that no one ever used the logic he thought was common.

"I don't like any of the parks here." My Aunt Tracy had taken a seat when Gramps gave his news. Now she looked at him not as if he were a stranger, but it was like she'd always known he was crazy, and just assumed it would never pop up before he died. All of the adults were looking at him like that. Like he was so old he'd keel over in a second let alone be able to pack up and move to middle-of-nowhere Kentucky. Gramps wasn't *that* old. Up until this point he'd really been in his right mind. He'd always say something a little off, but he was standing, so we figured he was fine.

"I've always wanted to be a park ranger, ever since I was a boy. Now of course, my father said no, and so I went to school and I did medicine, and the money was damn good. But now I have time. I don't have a lot of it, but at least I've got some. And I want to use that time to do something I like."

His mind was completely, bizarrely made up. I just looked at him. Later that night, while he was smoking his pipe, I went and sat down on the arm of the big green chair in the living room right next to him.

"How long?"

“What?”

“How long will you be gone?”

He chuckled. “It’s not forever, Hannah. But I want to try it out, see what I missed.”

I liked that. He just wanted to see what he’d missed. And it wasn’t like he wanted to live there forever. “I can live with that, I guess.”

“You guess? You have no choice, kid. I’m going down there and you can’t stop me.”

I laugh a little. “I won’t. But I’ll miss you.”

“Well, maybe you should try talking to other people in the family. Then you might not miss me so much.” He laughs at his own joke and starts to cough a little. I pat his back.

“So what’s the name of the park, Gramps?”

He took a big puff and smiled. “Yatesville Lake State Park.” I reached for the pipe and he smacked my hand away without missing a beat. “I’ll be working with two brothers who’ve worked there since they were boys. A real family affair.”

I didn’t know what he was referring to when he said “real.” He sounded disappointed in something in his life, like he wished he’d been in a family business. No one in my family was interested in the same things, and I was sure that a family business would end the way they did in movies, a dad yelling at his son for not taking over the family business. They’d have to change the name of the store from “Barr & Son,” or “Barr Bros.” to “Auto Shop.” The disappointment of the entire family would be that final name change that said, “We aren’t close enough as a family to run a simple business. We suck.” I wanted to ask Gramps more about this family business he craved, but he was asleep. Loud snoring, head rolled to the right, asleep. I smiled a little and shook his arm lightly. He sat up startled. Grumbling about packing or something. He got up from

his couch with a considerable amount of effort for someone who just decided to be a park ranger in Kentucky, and shuffled off to bed. I slid down into the couch and flipped on the TV.

Some local commercial for a heating company came on. I hated local commercials. They were always far too awkward for the average late night channel surfer. The man on the screen was dressed in a shirt and khakis that were probably just two sizes too big for him. He stood awkwardly still, with his arms bent at an angle that said, "I've thought about how my arms should look for about four hours now. I deeply regret every decision of this position, but we already started filming so I'm stuck like this." I thought about what it would look like for my family to be in a commercial together.

It would be an absolute shit show. Gramps would make jokes about the cameraman, or my dad's choice of a tie, or Aunt Margie big hair. Nana would sit in the corner with a stern look only rivaled by the queen. My brother Paul would be a total ham, trying to get all the camera time. I'm not sure what my parents would be doing, if I were them, I'd opt out of the commercial to make more room for the cute little cousins who'd run around and scream or pee themselves, unable to take direction from the smelly man we hired to shoot this commercial-turned-short film.

We weren't really the "family business" type. It was no one's fault. We were just on the louder, more confrontational side. Family businesses were nice if your family got along, and we fed off conflict.

My grandpa didn't move to Kentucky until February, and I didn't get to visit him until May when school was over. He and Nana had moved to Louisa, just ten minutes from the road to the state park, which was about a 20-minute drive down a windy road. I drove up to the small cabin that served as the park ranger headquarters and parked my car. It was warm, but not hot, as

if the mountains didn't know that it was summer yet. Even without sweltering heat, I was managing to sweat and I opted out of the hoodie. I was thankful for my swimsuit on underneath my clothes. I checked my phone and re-read the text from Gramps. All it said was "meet u in 10. big cabin." It was weird enough that Gramps was texting me, but even I typed out a full "you" in my texts and I was just 19. I sent Paul a quick text to see when he'd be coming to town and checked for any new messages from my parents. A loud honk from behind scared me and I spun around to see my grandpa and a bald man waving at me from a huge silver truck.

"Is that my Hannah Banana?" My grandpa hopped out of the truck and shuffled over to me to give me a big hug. In the back seat of the truck I now saw my grandma, looking somewhat pleasant, and a sweet looking woman who looked like she just wanted to bake me cookies from now until I left. Nana got out of the car and gave me a big smile. She came over and squeezed my shoulders so hard I think one got dislocated. Gramps and Nana had not yet reached the age where they were unable to do things for themselves. Nana still went to water aerobics; she wasn't teaching the class or anything, and everyone else there was about 80, but she made it through every other morning at 6 a.m., so she was mobile. Gramps had trouble getting out of his chair at times, but he could still fix up his car and lift my little cousins. They were healthy, but they weren't *this* healthy. I wasn't sure what was in the Kentucky air, but my grandparents were looking ungodly youthful for their age. They called their friends over and introduced me to Mike and Dana.

Mike gave me a big hug. "When they said we needed to get Hannah Banana, I thought they wanted me to drive to the grocery store." All the adults laughed heartily at Mike's joke. I smiled uncomfortably. I've never been sure of the proper response to a Dad joke. Dana hugged me next.

“Oh, I’ve just heard so much about you. I heard you like to bake, so tonight after everybody gets here we’re going to make a bunch of cookies and cupcakes together.”

I smiled and nodded. “Okay.” Her voice was so sweet that I couldn’t imagine disappointing her. Besides, I did like to bake, not as much as she apparently thought I did, but I loved cupcakes. Dana clapped her hands in front of her face, ready for our random bonding experience.

The last time my family had gone to a park was when I was 11. We went to the Grand Canyon. Dad and Paul would go as close to the edge as possible while I stayed back, not so sure about testing fate in that way. Aunt Margie came with us and every time someone would approach an edge, she’d shriek far too loudly for a public place and ask my mother if she was going to do anything about her son. My mom shrugged and did nothing. Gramps looked pretty uncomfortable the whole time, not really up for the whole “heights” thing. He kept back with me, and we took in the scenery together, from the guardrails, the way it was meant to be experienced. Grandma had kept her mean mug on the whole trip, complaining about the heat, about the other tourists, the amount of pictures my mom took. The only time she didn’t complain was at a steak dinner the second night we were there. It must have been because they messed up my mom’s order and she had to sit there and watch the rest of us eat before they finally rushed out her chicken dish. “Who the hell orders chicken at a steak restaurant?” I couldn’t think of a time when my grandparents had been equally happy about anything. It was unsettling.

“Where are you parents?” Nana was leading me to the truck without leaving any opportunity for objection.

“They didn’t want to drive over from Virginia, so I’m picking them up from the airport later tonight.”

“Wonderful. How’s your mom?”

I stopped walking. “She’s fine.” It’s not that Nana didn’t like my mom, she just preferred Uncle Charles’ wife more. Nana smiled and kept pushing me toward the truck.

I was trying to slow down so we’d have time to talk about where they were taking me, but she was so strong now, she just whipped me right along. Before I knew it, I was in the backseat, sitting between Nana and Dana while Mike and Gramps navigated the truck to some location deep in the park. The truck smelled a little off, and I realized why as Gramps lit up his pipe filled with something other than tobacco this time. My eyes nearly popped out of their sockets, but I calmed myself down and just let it happen. It was probably medicinal, and it’s not like I hadn’t tried smoking weed before. I just wasn’t expecting to get hotboxed with my grandparents and their elderly friends. As we drove further away from all the pavilions, Mike started to explain how long he’d been at the park.

“My little brother Tim and I been in charge of this park for bout 20 years now. My daddy was a park ranger, his daddy was a park ranger, and his daddy was a park ranger. We been in charge for 20 years but we were coming down to the park to help my dad out way before that. Even my cousins work here with us. Now we’re hoping to expand the care of the park to your family. Your grandpa says your dad won’t come down, but I said ‘Give it time,’ he’ll come round. You gonna take care of ol’ Yatesville Lake, Hannah?”

I’d been trying to trace our position, but his question pulled me in abruptly. “What?”

“Hannah’s got to finish school before she can make a move like this, Mike.” My Nana was smiling at me with some odd combination of pride and happiness. It’s not like I’d never seen Nana smile, I’d just never seen her smile this much. She was having a good time with these people driving around this park. My brother used to joke around and threaten to take her

mudding back in Virginia. I wonder what she'd say now. She would probably jump at the opportunity, which was weird, but fit her new situation. Her skin was practically glowing. We stopped at a small clearing and everyone started getting out of the truck.

“What’s going on?” I was leaning on the truck, not afraid of nature, just afraid of what it had done to my grandparents.

“You brought your swimsuit right?” Gramps was yelling over his shoulder as he disappeared through some trees with Mike. Dana came over to me and put her arm around my shoulder.

“It’s okay. It’s just a rope swing.” Her voice was sweet like macaroons. I looked at her incredulously.

“A rope swing?” I swung my gaze to Nana. “Nana, you’re gonna jump off a rope swing?”

Nana had a lazy smile on her face as she nodded vigorously. “Right into the lake, honey.”

“You’re gonna do it too, right Hannah?” Dana was giving me an expectant look.

“Will she be alright in the water?” I welcomed the old concerned voice of the Nana I’d always known, even though it was now raises more fears about what might be in that water.

“Of course! My grandson comes along all the time.”

Nana’s look of concern disappeared and was immediately replaced by that smile. I’d lost my only out. We walked for a couple minutes through some trees until I could see the lake through the leaves. My sandals gripped nicely on the ground and I felt just a tiny bit secure. I’d never been on a rope swing. I’d been on some natural adventures before, but they were mostly climbing a tree in the backyard, or camping near the friary in town. This was more than I had bargained for, and I kept stopping along the way, only to have Nana or Dana physically push me forward.

The sun peeked through the trees in little gasps, poking my bare shoulders with little bursts of heat. I crept toward the edge of the small cliff and stood by my grandfather. “Ain’t it beautiful?” I looked down at the water below us. I peeked a little further and regretted my decision immediately. Closest to our side of the cliff was a little bank with some sand and a lot of rocks. I didn’t want my fears to get the best of me, but they were pretty strong fears of busting my butt, or worse, my head on the ground. Gramps was hollering to Mike with his right hand on a tree next to us and his left hand on his hip. I watched another man back up and swing with all his might into the lake below. A woman who looked older than Nana and Dana, but who still had that glow the others had walked up to me carrying a water bottle.

“Hi there, honey. I’m Joanne, Tim’s wife.” I shake her hand lightly. “Honey, you look a bit pale. Drink some of this and you’ll feel much better. I took a big sip and immediately started choking. It was not water, and it wasn’t the cheap vodka I drank at school. This was advanced alcohol. Joanne, Dana, and Nana all giggled at my misfortune as I handed Joanne back her poison. I sat down on the ground near the edge, but not too close.

The water here was bluer than the rest of the lake if that was even possible. The sand on the bank below actually glistened in the sunlight. I’d never seen anything so magnificent. The man resurfaced and I saw him swim toward four other people. I looked at Gramps for confirmation. “Tim’s the man who just jumped, and that’s Ron, Earl and their wives. They’re Mike’s cousins. Isn’t that something? The whole family just comes out here to be together and chill all the time.” Gramps looked so wistful. Like he was starting over, making his life what he’d always wanted it to be. I wasn’t sure if I should be jealous that these people could make my grandpa feel a way my family didn’t. Not that they could possibly steal my grandfather from me, but it was like he’d found his niche. He looked happy, and I wanted to share that happiness with

him. Maybe it was just the abundant sunlight, but he looked younger, more like he looked when I was a kid. But even more so, because when I was a kid he had the tired look of someone who did what they were supposed to do in life and never what they wanted to do.

I wondered what the rest of my family would think of Gramps and Nana's newfound youth. I know Paul would share my feelings, but would the adults in the family be supportive or scold Gramps for smoking? Maybe they would be jealous. My parents and their siblings were starting to get stuck in their lives and all the old people around me at this lake were so free to do whatever they wanted. I take a look around the group again. Ron's wife was sitting on the bank by the edge tanning. Dana, Nana, and Joanne were still laughing about something, passing around the devil juice in Joanne's water bottle. Mike had already swung in, and now he and his brother were cheering my grandpa on. I looked at the water around me and breathed in the fresh mountain air, trying to calm myself. I stood up again and paid attention to the rope swing in front of Gramps. The women were supposedly waiting their turn as Gramps grabbed the rope with a long branch. He looked at me with the biggest look of excitement I'd ever seen on his face. He scooted back real far.

“Watch how an old pro does this, Hannah.” He bounded forward quickly, his shoulders tensing as he swung through the air, howling the whole way down into the blue water.

Chapter 3

660,001

“Are you going to church?”

I hear Abby’s voice but I can’t see anything. She coughs and I try to follow the sound. She asks again, her voice barely a whisper.

“Are you going to church?”

I won’t answer until I find her. I want to explain myself. Try to rationalize my fleeting relationship with my family’s religion. Everything is still dark, and I feel the African heat baking my face. I finally feel something and grab it. It scratches my arm frantically and I open my eyes.

I wake up squinting as the sun beams down through my window. I forgot to close the blinds again last night. My cat Echo is dashing around my room, obviously frazzled after I grabbed her a few seconds ago. I sit up and put my head between my knees. I hate having this dream. I’ve had it ever since Abby died of malaria three years ago, and with Easter around the corner, I’ve had it every night this week. Sometimes I can see her, lying in that small bed, waiting to be transported to the hospital, knowing the whole time that she will die soon. Sometimes, like today, I can’t see anything. I just hear her voice. Always asking, “Are you going to church?”

I get out of bed and stretch, taking a glance at the clock on my dresser. 10:42 a.m. Shit. I’m late. I shake the image out of my head and quickly shuffled to the bathroom. I take in my puffy eyes and my wild hair and splash myself with water. I start to brush my teeth and go over my lines for acting class.

What if you drop dead in there and we don't get the chance to chat after? Do... Fuck. Do you understand... No. Do you know how many people die... Maybe that was it. I decide to skip brushing my hair, just running my hand through the naps quickly and sliding a beanie on top of my mop. I run down the stairs and out the door, hoping I don't hit traffic on my way to class.

I started taking this acting class when I moved to New York. I transferred to a city college when I realized that small schools are great but not when they're in small towns. I loved the city and was hoping to start getting jobs, but no dice. My parents were supportive of my dreams, but I was so worried about disappointing them, I started looking for non-acting jobs in the city. Once again, no dice. Instead, I was stuck in this class with my acting partner, Rachel. She was super cheery and really nice, and so to be an asshole, our instructor gave us the scene "The Apostle John" by Jeff Goode. It's about this girl peacefully using a public restroom when this Jehovah's Witness or someone like that comes up to her and starts asking questions about Jesus. By the end of the scene, Nikki, the skeptical, sarcastic atheist, is changed, or maybe changed. It's up to the audience. You'd think I'd play Nikki because she's more like me. But nope. I play Paula. The Jehovah's Witness/Jesus Freak/religious nutcase who gives Nikki the hard time. I guess my professor wanted to give us the ultimate acting challenge. It was working.

I run into the auditorium just as everyone starts breaking into our pairs. I spot Rachel from across the room and walk over to her.

"Hey, girl." Her ever cheerful demeanor is entirely too much for this morning. I just sigh and put my bag down, sitting across from her in the chairs she'd set up. "Rough night?"

"No, I just had a weird dream, and then I woke up late. It's fine. Let's just get started."

Rachel pulls a piece of paper out of her folder. She holds it in front of me like it's a precious artifact, one hand supporting the bottom, the other covering the information on top.

“What’s this?”

“It’s for my show next weekend.” She was playing with her hands, which she always did when she was nervous, or before a performance.

“I didn’t know you were in a show.” There is excitement in my voice, but I’m not sure if it’s because Rachel being in a show means there’s hope for me some day, or if I’m actually happy for her. Probably the former.

“Well, I am. So are you gonna come?” She looks at me nervously. Like my presence at this show could somehow make it better, make her perform to her fullest.

I nod my head, and she squeals and hugs me. It’s early, and I’m not sure if we’re close enough for hugs, but I lift my arms to hug her back as she’s pulling away. She’s too excited to notice the awkwardness of me sitting there with my arms outstretched. I put my arms back by my sides and suggest that we get to work on our scene.

“Let’s start from the middle.” She practically pops out of her chair like popcorn and takes her place lifting her arms up and down and breathing deeply. I roll my eyes and unstick myself from my chair like a burnt ass kernel at the bottom of the bag and stand beside her.

“We’ll start from your line.” She slouches a bit and takes on a bored stance, forever physicalizing her character. I start my lines.

“You think that’s bad? Try dying on a toilet and then being cast into a lake of fire right after. That’s really gotta suck.” I was trying to get myself into the scene, but it was difficult.

“Okay, that’s enough.”

“I don’t know you. You don’t know me. After this, we may never see each other again.”

“Please, God, let that be true.”

“How do you think I'd feel if you went in there and dropped dead and I just stood by and didn't even try to throw you a life line?”

“Hey, I don't need a life line.”

“You don't need one? Oh, I see, you've got it all taken care of. When the Judgment Day comes, you're just going to walk right up to the Heavenly Father and say, ‘Look at my schedule! When did I have time for salvation? Thursday I was in meetings all day, and Friday I had that lunch, and you know how tired I am at the end of the day, so let's not do it in the evening, and sure there was that minute I had in the bathroom, but that's my alone time. I need to focus. I can't have somebody looking out for my eternal well-being.’”

It's a funny scene when it's not such a blatant judgment call on your way of life. This scene infuriates me so much because it makes me feel like I felt each and every time Abby looked at me with her dark eyes and say, “Are you going to church?” Ever since we'd been babies, my cousin Abby had been devoted to God. We'd sit in Sunday School in our village, and while I'd be playing with toys or sleeping or doing something else that had nothing to do with God or Jesus, Abby would be praying, or putting her entire soul into her crafts. When we got older, she'd always ask me about school in America and my acting classes. I always gave her the short spiel, thinking I'd tell her more about it later, or she'd understand my lifestyle when she came to visit me in New York. She never did. I didn't ask her much about her life, assuming there wasn't room for much else outside of church. She was practically the real life image of Paula, and I am Nikki, without the transformation at the end. The reminder of Abby's attempts to transform me killed me.

As we leave class, Rachel reminded me again about her show. “It's really going to be a good show. I'm just hoping we get a nice crowd.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” I assured her. “Where is it again?”

“At St. Peter’s Cathedral. On 9th.”

“Oh. Cool.” That was kind of a deal breaker. I don’t go to church, and I immediately start wondering if this is a religious show Rachel’s in. It’s not like I know nothing about Christianity. I went to Sunday School and I sang the songs, I just hadn’t been in a church in a long time. She waves goodbye at the bus stop, and I head for my brother’s store.

I was raised in the church, going every Sunday in a different itchy outfit that my mum, or my grandma, or my aunt, or some other lady in my house would tug over my little shoulders in the morning. I hated the clothes, but I never minded the service. When I got older, I just didn’t seem to care about church as much. I never paid attention to the sermon. I felt like I was faking it, imitating what my parents and everyone else over forty was supposed to be doing during the service. Abby knew what she was doing. She had read the Bible in its entirety at least ten times by the time we were 15. I didn’t get it. When I moved out, I stopped going to church. It doesn’t seem right to me. I don’t go to temple and I don’t go to mosque, so why should I pretend I’m something I’m not in church? I maintain a spiritual connection with a higher power, but I don’t identify with any religion I’ve come across since. My parents forgave my decision not to go to church, mostly because they don’t know, and my brother has never told them. My take on religion isn’t something that is common in my pure Nigerian family. I was expected to go to church every Sunday and to maintain my relationship with God. Some of my cousins on my dad’s side were Muslim, but they too stayed true to their religion. The issue was that if I continued to go to church, I would be lying, and I think that is probably worse than leaving the church. I’m not so sure the rest of my family agrees with my decision. Every time we travel to

Nigeria, I put on the façade and go to church with everyone, but for some reason, when Abby died, I had decided that I wasn't going to go to church the next morning. And I didn't.

My brother Ollie is only four years older than me, but he seems so much more like an adult. When we moved to New York, he went the entrepreneurial route and has actually made it work for him. Ollie owns a record store in Brooklyn. It's always filled with hipsters and other people who are just too much for me. But I like hanging out with him when he's in his element. He makes more sense with a nice record playing under what he's saying. He usually plays older music, but sometimes he'll throw on some Adele just for me.

"Hey there, munchkin!" He strolls around some stacks of records and gives me a hug. Ollie isn't much taller than me, but he's a big guy, and he always feels the need to remind me of that by picking me up when he hugs me. I wait until he is done before regaining my breath and speaking.

"Just thought I'd stop by and see if you were busy." I looked around and saw a couple of the regulars by the Sinatra section. They were in here just about every day and would hang out in the Sinatra section. They like Sinatra enough to crowd that area of the store, but not enough to actually buy one of his albums. I roll my eyes and scoff at a tall kid in a fedora humming "That's Life," like it's the motto of his life. Ollie cocks his head at me. I'm not usually this pessimistic and he can tell something's up.

"What's up, munchkin? Something happen at your class?"

I look around, not really wanting to talk about my brain functions in front of all the posers, and when I'm sure no one is paying attention to us, I shake my head at Ollie. "I had that dream again."

“The one with Abby?” I’ve told him about this dream multiple times. The different ways it happens, how she’s always repeating “Are you going to church?” in some kind of haunting melody like a soundtrack to my sad, churchless life.

I nod as he starts to stack CDs. I want to talk more about it, ask him if he’s going home for Easter next weekend, make sure he can cover for me with Mum and Dad. “When was the last time you talked to Mum?”

“Couple days ago. You?”

“Last night. She always calls to ask how I’m doing.”

“Well she should. You had us pretty worried last year.” I had a bit of a mental breakdown last year during finals. I was taking this semester off to keep my stress levels down. Ollie was moving all around the store, in and around aisles reorganizing different records. I knew they were all in perfect order, but sometimes he would rearrange them just to mess with his wife, Mara.

“I know. I’m sorry. It was a rough time for me too.”

“Question.” Ollie stopped moving and looked at me. “Decade or A-Z?” I sigh loudly and give him a frustrated look. He stares back innocently. “What?”

“Could you please focus, Ollie?”

“Can *you* focus, Nikki?”

“We were having a serious conversation.”

“And this is a serious question. Can you give me a serious answer? Are you capable of that?”

I sigh again. He doesn’t look presentable very often, especially today. He insists on looking (and acting) like a college bro with a backwards cap on and crewneck with burgers and

fries printed all over it. Sometimes I'm shocked by his ability to act like a kid and also an adult in the same ten-minute time frame. "Decade."

"Thank you," he says with an exasperated huff. I walk over to a random section and pick up an album. It's *Back to Black*. I smile excitedly and look over at Ollie. He is standing with Mara, who just walked in.

"Did you rearrange anything while I was gone?" She looks serious, but I know she's just kidding around with him.

"Of course I did. How the hell are we supposed to make our store a refreshing experience if we always keep shit A-Z? Gotta mix it up in life, babe."

I crinkle my nose as Mara giggles at him. "Hi, Nikki."

"Hey, Mara." I stroll over casually, the Amy Winehouse record in hand.

"What are you doing next weekend?"

"Nothing. Why?" I set the Winehouse record on the table in front of my brother. He glares at me and shakes his head no. I haven't paid for a record in a while and I've been getting the sense that he is a tad bit frustrated with me.

"Well, it's Easter weekend." I nod my head absentmindedly as my brother shakes his again and crosses his arms. I give him my best pouty face and hold the record against my chest, hugging it like a teddy bear. Mara is still talking. "I was hoping you'd come to church with Ollie and me."

I put the record back on the counter and looked at her. "What?"

"I wanted to know if you'd go to church next Sunday with us. There's a huge brunch after and it's a fun time, I think."

I shoot Ollie a look. "I don't know, Mara..." Ollie pushes the album towards me like a bribe.

"It's, uh, a big event at Mara's church, and we were hoping you'd, uh, like to come with us." Ollie trips over his words left and right. I pick up the record and look back at Mara.

"I'll try to see if I can make it. But, don't go through too much trouble in case I can't make it." Mara's cheeks seem to explode with happiness at the teeniest prospect of me going to church. I know I wouldn't be going; I just haven't come up with my excuse yet. I hug Mara goodbye and leave the store. Ollie runs after me and grabs my arm by the corner.

"Hey, wait." He isn't really one for running and he is pretty winded.

"Shit, Ollie. What the fuck am I supposed to say to her?"

"You could try just going to church."

"No. It's not like it's Christmas where you can just fake it 'til you make it. Easter is important, and it is not the time for me to feign a good relationship with Jesus Christ."

He looks nervous. "Nikki, I really think it'd be good for you to go with us."

"It won't."

Ollie sighs loudly and looks down at the concrete between us. "You can't blame church for Abby's death."

"Can't I? She prayed every day, sat in church every day, every fucking meal she consumed was communion bread and the blood of Jesus. And where is she now? Dead. Probably up in heaven with the God she was so devoted to, who couldn't even lift a finger to save her. I want no part in that."

"That's not fair, Nikki."

“Whatever, Ollie. I gotta go.” I spin around and leave him standing there. I take the bus home and put the record on the player Ollie bought me for my last birthday. The sound crackles a bit before Amy Winehouse’s voice begins to sing through my speakers. I fall asleep after a couple of songs, dreaming again of Abby, this time, seeing it exactly as it happened three years before.

I remember hearing that Abby had malaria, but I’d figured she’d be fine. I hadn’t even batted an eyelash as my father booked our flights to the village. I didn’t fret while my brother and mother went in and saw her, leaving me in the living room to entertain my little cousins. I ignored the whole ordeal until she asked me to come in and see her on Saturday night. The room was lit by one ceiling light with a fan that only pushed the hot air from above into more hot air below. There were two fans in the room, taken from other rooms in the house to keep her cool. The window was open, the net recently replaced, letting in the rare breeze in a futile attempt to cool things down. Beads of sweat formed on my head as I stood in the doorway looking at her. Abby was two months older than me, but lying on her bed, she looked stale and worn out. She was strapped to a breath monitor and she was reading the Bible. We spoke shortly about school and my acting classes. Then she held my hand gently and asked me what day it was.

“Saturday. Well, in an hour it will technically be Sunday.”

“Is it that late?” She tried to look at the clock with no luck. She barely had any strength left to support her head.

“Yup.”

“Hmm.” She looked at the window, as if that would make time move faster. As if it would make the pain stop, the heat subside, the suffering cease. “Are you going to church in the morning?”

I moved my hand away from hers and looked away. I didn't say anything for a long time. I heard her take in a crackled breath and I looked at her. She was gazing at me with her round eyes, asking so much more than my RSVP to the Easter service. She wanted to know if I was still Christian. She wanted to know if I had given in to the ways of America and ditched my faith. She wanted to look into my eyes, hear my answer and believe that I still led a life with God, that as I frolicked around New York, I prayed, I attended church services, I still worshipped her Lord and Savior. I could think of no answer that would convince her of these things. They would all be lies. 660,000 people die of malaria each year out of over 200 million cases and she was one of them. I couldn't figure out how she'd pray and worship every second of every day, and she was still lying here, unable to breathe, or move, or go to church. I couldn't figure out how I could get bitten every day, and never fall ill. How I could give up on her Savior, but he could save me and not her? I shook my head no and she nodded slowly and looked away from me.

I had never felt like more of a fraud. I stood up from the bed without a word to her and left the room. I walked outside and stood by the entrance to the compound in the dry season heat. I felt sweat trickle down my brow as I looked up into the darkness at the dusty haze that never cleared to show clouds, or stars, or galaxies. I felt things swarm around my head: thoughts, fears, mosquitos. I prayed that one would bite me, that I would feel the poison run through my body, that I would lie down in the bed beside her and breathe my last feelings of life into her body, so she could go to Ollie's record store, so she could take acting classes, so she could see the stars.

Chapter 4

Confession

When I told my family I wanted to kill myself, I'm not sure what I expected. I think I wanted them to show me more love, be more understanding, let me live my life the way I wanted to live it, things like that. I assumed that there would be a lot of emotions expressed. I thought my mother might cry. Maybe my older sisters would try to help me in some way. I hadn't thought of what my father might say or how he would react, but it fit into the "loving" category. I wasn't sure that I wanted to die, but I didn't know how else to explain my feelings. I'd always take long glances at my wrists, imagine how easy it would be to slice my forearm vertically and just lie in a bathtub filled with water. I thought about all the pills in the medicine cabinet, wondering how many of each it would require, wanting to take a pill bottle to the face and then lie down gently to never wake up again. I didn't think about the future in any serious terms because I never thought I would make it past 18. I figured if I told them, they would help. They did not.

At first, my father looked at me sideways and just said, "What?" My sisters said nothing, just gave me quizzical looks. My mother glared at me with a blind rage before ripping me a new one. All four of them began speaking at once. There was a lot of talk about God and suicide and hell and me being an idiot and kicking me out and at some point I'm pretty sure I heard one of my family members yell, "Go ahead and do it."

Obviously, this was not the response I had expected. I ran out of the house crying. I ended up down by a lake ten minutes from my house. Through my tears I saw a woman who lived down the street walking her dog. Her son had committed suicide when I was very young. He was a couple of years older than my oldest sister Hannah. She didn't notice me sitting by the

lake, just kept on walking by. I tried to replay the scene with my family. I saw my family staring at me as I revealed the issues going on in my brain the only way I knew how. In my head, they all became different monsters as they each voiced their loud opinions on why I was awful for wanting to die. I tried to think if I'd heard anything supportive, but I knew I hadn't. An hour later my oldest sister Hannah drove by looking for me and then came back around and came to get me. We didn't talk the whole drive and when I got home I ran up to my room, refusing to speak to anyone.

That night, my mother came into my room to talk about my proclamation. She said she would set up an appointment with her friend who was a therapist. I just looked at her wondering if she'd meant it when she told me to go ahead kill myself.

It's not like I had a plan for killing myself. I'd cut once before, but the blood freaked me out and I hated explaining the deep gash in my ring finger. She had to just be angry when she said that. And what was I supposed to say to her best friend the therapist? If any issues with my parents came up, confidentiality my ass, my parents would know within the hour. I politely declined her offer and went to sleep still questioning the actual strength of my skin when exposed to the X-Acto knife in my top drawer.

The next day, my father gave me a lecture about jokes. What I had said was no joke. He rambled for about 15 minutes. I saw my other sister Frankie walk into the kitchen for breakfast and then turn around and leave when she saw us. My father was still calling what I said a "joke." He said suicide was a serious matter. I didn't try to interject, didn't dare explain myself. This was his time to talk, as if he hadn't spoken enough already the day before. I thought about what he'd said about God. "God made you. Don't you think he'd be upset if you killed yourself?" It sounded like something sweet, but then I remembered the decibel at which he said it. The growl

in his voice. The immediate mention of hell afterwards. I stared into my glass of water and nodded at the appropriate moments. Before he left, he said he loved me. Then he picked his briefcase off the table and went to work.

For the next couple of weeks, my family tried to forget that I was suicidal, and I tried to stop being suicidal. When suicide came up on the news or in the papers or in any kind of conversation, I would look at the floor, my sisters would exchange a glance, my father would clear his throat. I'm sure my mother was the only one who would look at me, forcing me to question what I'd said over and over again. When school started I auditioned for the play and got a role. After school ended, I would wait the 2 hours before rehearsal would begin, and then stick around for another hour after rehearsal to minimize my time at home. I joined choir to make sure that after the show, I'd still have other things to do after school. I was afraid to be alone or to be too still. I knew I'd start to think about killing myself again. I knew that I would replay that conversation in my head. I knew I'd hear my mother tell me to go ahead and kill myself and I would do it. She was always encouraging my decisions.

One night, Hannah didn't come home from school. I asked Frankie where she was. Apparently, her best friend had told her that he wanted to die. She was at his house, keeping an eye on him and consoling him. I threw my dinner in the trash and went to bed. When Hannah came home, I heard my mom ask her if everything was okay. They talked about it. Wondered what his home life was like and questioned why he'd want to kill himself. They concluded that there must be something going on at home. My father said that Trevor needed more friends like Hannah to get him through this. Frankie said he needed to spend more time with his family so they could work out their issues. I took the X-Acto out of my drawer and looked at the blade for ten minutes before falling asleep. I secretly hoped Trevor would kill himself.

I woke up early before school to make my lunch. Hannah and Frankie were sitting at the kitchen table talking about Trevor. I got the stepping stool from under the table and took it to the medicine cabinet above the microwave. I looked through all the pill bottles until I found one with a high number of milligrams in each pill. They were my mom's sleeping pills. I took it out of the cabinet and put it in my pocket. I wanted to keep my options open. I also wanted to take them from my mom. As I closed the cabinet and walked out the front door, I kept hearing her words, "Go ahead."

After school, I saw Trevor sitting on the benches by the parking lot. I stopped walking and watched him as he waited for his ride. I heard he wasn't allowed to drive himself to school anymore. He was hunched over, playing with a blade of grass in his hands. I wanted to walk over to the bench and sit down next to him. I wanted to whisper in his ear, "Why did you want to kill yourself?" I don't know what I'd expect him to say, but I wanted to talk to him about it. I wanted to know what was different about his situation that made my family more understanding. Was his family bat-shit crazy? What reasons did he tell Hannah that made her sympathize with him? Maybe Trevor's family was awful and that's why he wanted to kill himself. Maybe my family couldn't see themselves as being awful, so they decided I had no reason to be suicidal. I didn't want to kill myself because I thought my family was awful. Based on their reactions to my confession, I probably had more reason now than I had before.

When I got home, Frankie was sitting in the living room, but no one else was home. I ran up to my room and closed the door. I took the pill bottle out of my backpack and put it in the drawer next to the knife. I laid in bed listening to music all night until I fell asleep. I wasn't sure if I wanted to wake up. I still wasn't sure if I wanted to die.

It was Saturday, which meant one month earlier, I would be practicing parking with my father. We'd given up on that as of late. I didn't really like being in a car with him. He had picked me up from rehearsal one night and proceeded to scold me for not spending more time with my family. I wondered what he thought an evening of family bonding would be like. I didn't like the idea, so I continued to avoid my family at all costs.

I was sitting in the living room alone when Frankie walked in. She sat down next to me on the couch. Neither of us said anything for an hour, just sat there watching cartoons. She asked if I wanted to go for a ride and I nodded my head. It was 8 a.m. and it was raining. She drove to the lake and turned off the car.

"Why would you say you want to kill yourself?" I felt like I was in questioning. She sat there looking out the front window, her words pricking at my face.

"Because I do." I looked at my hands. I had two Band-Aids on my pointer finger and one on my thumb from an escapade with my X-Acto a couple nights earlier. The pain did nothing for the sadness, and it didn't make me feel like I was in control of the pain I was feeling. I'd heard stories about people cutting to feel like even if their lives were falling apart, they could control the physical pain they felt every day. I knew I couldn't handle that pain every day, but I was trying everything to decide if I wanted to be alive.

Frankie let out a long, loud breath. "How do you even know something like that?"

I shrugged. "Have you ever thought about your future?"

She looked at me the same way she did when I told her I wanted to kill myself. "Of course I have."

"I have too. I only make it four years into my future and I'm still miserable." I look back at the streaks on the window. "I try all kinds of different scenarios; I think about good things that

could happen to me in the next four years and they all just seem so impossible that I'm left with this sad existence now and in the future. If all I can imagine for myself is a life where I'm 18 and I still hate myself and hate my life, then I don't really want to be alive."

"I just don't get how that makes you suicidal."

"There aren't ample opportunities for me to die by chance in this wonderfully safe town, so my only option is to kill myself. If you don't know, that is called suicide."

She turned to me with a look of anger on her face. "Don't do that. Don't make jokes about this like it's funny."

"I'm not joking, Frankie."

"Then why did you say it? How do you think we all must feel to hear you say something like that?"

"I think I've heard enough about how you all feel about my pain. I didn't tell you that I was suicidal for attention. I didn't say it to be a dickhead. I wasn't kidding. It's not something I take lightly. But something is wrong with me and I needed my family to help me figure it out so that maybe I could stop wanting to die. I wanted you all to know since I couldn't stop the thoughts by myself."

"Did you even try to stop them yourself?"

I didn't say anything. Frankie turned the car back on and let the wipers fly back and forth over the windshield. She didn't put the car in gear, just letting the vibration of the engine try to calm both of us.

"Sophie."

I looked up from the floor. Frankie looked at my hand for a long time as if just realizing what was under those Band-Aids. I tucked my hand in my pockets uncomfortably and met her eyes. “Frankie?”

“I’m sorry.”

I just nodded my head and looked back down. We stayed at the lake, watching the rain make a million ripples in the surface, endlessly interrupting the reflection of the cloudy sky.

Chapter 5

Blade

I started carrying a knife around a few weeks ago. It's not big, just a small pocketknife with a clip to hold it in my pocket for easy access. It is completely camo print, including the blade, and just sharp enough, for what, I don't actually know.

I bought it from a small hardware store in the country while I was with my friend. He was there looking for some lumber and I was just along for the ride. I breathed in the fresh scent of wood, feeling like sawdust was gliding into my pores and loving it. I walked through literally every aisle waiting for Blaise to order everything he needed. When he started to pay for his stuff, I came up to the counter and saw the display of knives. I asked the big man in the trucker hat how much they cost and he chuckled a big man chuckle and said, "Ten dollars. Tryna buy your man a little gift?"

"Nope. I want it for myself."

The man looked confused. "What's a little lady need with a knife?"

I looked him in his round, red face and said, "You never know when you'll need a knife, sir." I slid him a ten-dollar bill and he shook his head and got the box out from below the desk. When Blaise and I got into the van, looked at me holding the cold metal in my hands and laughed.

"What?"

"Really, Jackie. What are you gonna do with a knife?"

“I don’t know. Open boxes. Cut apples. Defend myself.” I said the last one like a question and Blaise looked at me like I was crazy. “You never know.”

He shrugged and kept driving through the lumberyard. We didn’t talk about it again.

When I got back into the city, I clipped it on my hip and went to the grocery store. As I walked through the door, the cashier on my right said hello like he usually does. I smiled and waited for a response, some sort of comment on my weapon. Nothing. I went to the produce section and picked up four honeycrisp apples and went to pay for them. The cashier asked me about my day and I lied and said nothing was new. I took my bags and walked back home, unable to stop paying attention to the way the metal shifted on my hip every time my right foot hit the pavement. When I got back, I sat in the living room and sliced one apple with the blade. It didn’t feel right. I didn’t like the camo sliding effortlessly into the fruit so I cleaned it off and got a regular kitchen knife. I put the switchblade in the pocket of my sweatpants while I watched TV and beside my head on my nightstand when I went to sleep.

The next morning I tried putting the knife in my left pocket, and left for work. Halfway down the street, the metal started to poke me in my side. It didn’t feel right, so I went back to the other leg. Better. I didn’t feel any more or less safe than I used to. On my way to the subway, I went through the turnstile and heard the metal clang against metal. I looked around to see if anyone else heard. They didn’t. During the whole ride not one person noticed my blade, outlined by my pants, pushing out the fabric. No one made comments, nothing. I got off the train disappointed and walked up the stairs to the sidewalk. At work, I picked up the mail and there was a huge package for me to carry up. I brought it into my supervisor’s office and waited for him to try to open it. He started by trying to rip the tape off with his bare hands. When that didn’t work, he tried stabbing the box with a pen with no luck. I watched him struggle, the whole

time feeling the knife in the pocket of my pants. I wanted him to ask me. Ask if I had something to open it with. Then he opened his desk drawer and pulled out his keys. He stabbed the tape with the keys and ripped the box open. I didn't stay to see what was in it. I went to the break room and pulled an apple out of the fridge. There were no knives around to cut it with, so I just bit into it with my teeth.

A week after I bought it, I still hadn't really used it. It went everywhere with me during the day, snug against my body. At night I kept it on my nightstand, sometimes I would put it under my pillow before I fell asleep. When I took a shower, I left it on the soap stand, picking it up from time to time and opening the blade. I bought a bar of soap even though I always used shower gel. I tried carving the bar of soap into something interesting like a flower or a mini bust of Abraham Lincoln, but I didn't like that. I threw the mangled bar of soap away, but I kept bringing my knife into the shower with me.

I wasn't sure what I was waiting for. I'd never carried a weapon around before. I desperately needed a reason to use it, but I was too critical of its regular uses. I didn't want to slice apples or carve soaps. I wanted to see what it could do, how it was useful. I bought it out of curiosity and spite, and I was running out of mundane things to be curious about. That red-faced man wasn't right. I needed a knife. I just didn't know why.

I went on a date about a week ago with one of Blaise's friends. He said the guy was nice and joked that if it didn't go well I shouldn't stab him with my knife. I didn't laugh at Blaise's joke. We went out for coffee. There was a poetry reading at a small place downtown. I walked into the warm room and smelled the fresh dark roast. There was a quiet buzz around the room from people not wanting to speak too loudly in fear that they'd ruin the smooth atmosphere. I stood by the door and looked around for him. Joe and I had met at a party a couple of months

ago, and Blaise had been talking him up for months before that. He seemed a bit too literary for me, but I agreed to the date anyways because he was good-looking enough that it was okay. I wasn't looking forward to the reading; I didn't usually understand the same kind of poetry that Blaise and his friends liked. I craned my neck to look around the room. I was a little early, but I didn't think I was that early. I shifted to the side of the door so I wasn't in the way, resting my arm against a ledge, leaning against the wall. I felt my knife push into my side with the pressure and felt comforted. I spent most of the day wondering if I should leave it at home during the date, but habit won over and I kept it in my pants as I got dressed. I couldn't imagine going anywhere without the cool metal against my side, so it came on the date with me.

I found Joe in a small section of tables in the back of the room. He was tall but not in a lanky way, and he was wearing a simple sweater and jeans, which made me feel better about my sweater and jeans. He stood when he saw me and gave me a hug. "Hey," he breathed with a smile.

"Hi." I sat down in the hard, wooden chair across from him, not sure when to get up to get myself a latte and probably a shortbread cookie. We talked like strangers before the reading. It was casual small talk, but we kept pausing in between topics, not knowing how to continue a conversation that went, 'It's warming up since last week.' 'That's spring for you.' I kept thinking about other things to talk about that weren't work or the weather, but they didn't come fast enough.

The reading wasn't terrible. It was a poet who was friends with the owner so he got to read often. The poet wore thick-rimmed glasses that blended into his brown facial hair so that it seemed like his face was outlined and detailed in brown lines. His voice was just low enough to be pleasurable, and he didn't do that choppy reading where every single line is read with the

same inflection in the same places like this girl I knew in college did. He switched between lyric and narrative poems nicely, and so both Joe and I liked it. My favorite poem was one called “Stabbed” that took place in both the minds of a stab victim and the crazy man who stabbed him. The guy read both men’s minds in the same voice, not relying on sound to make us feel the differences in the men. It started with the stabber recounting the jabs into the other man’s side, feeling each puncture in his hand like a tiny bubble popping. In the end the victim describes the feeling the same way while he’s lying on the ground dying.

After the reading, we opted out of talking to the poet. Neither of us knew him, so we left and walked toward the subway together.

“So. Why did you finally decide to go out with me?” He walked kind of goofy, leaning from side to side to try to keep a nice pace that wasn’t too fast like we were trying to get it over with, but not too slow like we were unbearably lazy.

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. I’ve been feeling like doing different things lately, and this was pretty different.”

“Hmm.” He looked up at the sky while we walked closer to the subway station where we’d have to split up. “I guess that makes sense.” I looked at his jaw while he looked at the sky. It was strong under his small beard. It wasn’t lumberjack full, but it was nice. “Was it different enough that you’d want to do it again?” He took a break from looking at the stars we couldn’t see in the brightly lit city and looked at me.

I looked up at him. “Does that mean this date is over?”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

We took a walk through the park and sat down on a bench by a tree.

“So you’re telling me that you carry a knife around?”

“Yes,” I nodded once.

“What do you need a knife for in the city?” He sounded like he was trying not to laugh out loud.

I scoff at him. “You sound like Blaise. I will find a need for it.”

This time he didn’t hold back his laugh. “You’ve been holding that for weeks and you haven’t used it?”

I smacked his arm. “It’s not funny. I used it a couple of times, but it just wasn’t the right use.” He didn’t seem convinced by my faith in my knife. “Do you have a knife?”

“Of course I do. But I’m a guy. I need a knife.”

“What do you need a knife for in the city?”

He smiled at me. “I don’t know but I’ll figure it out.” He stood up from the bench and walk over to a bunch of trees. I followed him, still sour that he laughed at me.

“What are you doing?” I watched as he sauntered up to a tree with a big trunk. He reached in his pocket and pulled out a smooth all black pocketknife. He flipped it open and I saw that the blade was the same smooth black as the handle.

“How strong are tree trunks?” He was still staring at the tree. I stood next to him and looked at it.

“I don’t know. Pretty strong.”

“Pretty fucking strong, right?” He pulled his arm back and stabbed the tree with his knife.

“Joe!” He ignored me and pulled the blade out of the tree. Then he started carving. I watched silently as he carved a “J.” Before he started something else, I pulled my knife out of my pocket and carved a “J” next to it.

He stepped back from the tree and slipped his knife back into his pocket. It disappeared in the fabric of his pants, hidden from everyone but those who knew it was there.

“That’s a pretty good use.” He put his arm around my shoulders and continued to smile at our initials carved into the tree. I looked at his profile and then looked back at the tree. It was cheesy and weird and probably illegal, but I’d used my knife in the only way that didn’t feel too miniscule to matter. We stood there for a long time, contemplating other things to carve by the two sloppy J’s, itching to use our knives in this way again.

Chapter 6

Letters From Ivy

“Next slide please.” Anna clicks the mouse and I take a step back as the three-minute video about suicide prevention begins. It seems insanely melodramatic, but I couldn’t find anything I liked in the short amount of time I gave myself to complete the project. My eyes scan the classroom to see if the class is at least mildly interested in my presentation. I regret my decision immediately. . Melissa Airy is completely asleep, red hair scattered across her desk. A tiny snore escapes her nose and I have to turn away before I throw something at her. Gabby Whorepants pops her gum while doing something on her bedazzled iPhone. She’s probably picking which nude pictures to send to her 30-year old boyfriend. I thought Fat Nick was reading during my first slide, but now I see him lift a chicken wing out of his backpack and take a greasy bite. Chris Boland is just looking at me like I’m some sad puppy in the street. His mom is my therapist, and while it’s an uncomfortable connection, she’s the best therapist I’ve had so far. His eyes meet mine and I look away immediately. I can’t handle pity stares right now. This presentation is too close to home. Once the clip ends, I mumble some things about the different types of suicide hotlines available and wait for the awkward applause at the end of the presentation. Instead of taking my seat, I grab things and leave the classroom. I text Vin and tell him I’m skipping the rest of fourth. He tells me to meet him on the roof.

I grab my bootleg copy of the janitor’s keys and open the heavy green door to the closet. I gently push it back behind me without closing it for Vin to get in. I put my bag on the tile floor and start up the ladder. When I get to the top, I push the cold black panel up and pull myself onto

the roof. I make my way over to the second ladder and climb up. I sit on the edge and pull a joint and a lighter out of my pocket. It is a three-story building on top of a hill, so the view is great. I can see the bridge in the distance and think about how beautiful it was the day that Ivy jumped. I know she would have looked at the river below with everything she'd ever known spread out before her, and she would have felt peace. It didn't stop her, but I want her to have been happy. I hear rattling behind me as Vin climbs up the ladder. "What took you so long?" I ask.

"We can't all just stand up and leave in the middle of class, Olive." Vin pulls himself up and steps onto the gravel. "Ouch. Why is this crap even here?"

"Stop bitching and get up here." He grumbles under his breath and heads over to the second ladder. I ignore his griping while he joins me on the edge.

"So what happened? You couldn't get through one presentation?" He takes a hit and blows smoke rings through his lips.

"It's not that I couldn't get through it. I just..."

"Was it too hard?"

"Not at first. But then Fat Nick was eating chicken wings and people were sleeping and no one was listening to me and I just couldn't stand it anymore." I pick up a bunch of rocks and let them roll around in my hand.

"Wow. Not one person was paying attention?" Vin puts too much faith in our classmates.

"Chris was giving me this 'You're so pitiful' face." I let some of the rocks fall to the lower level of the roof and pick up more.

"Oooh, Chris Boland. Did you both confess your love for each other so you can move to the vineyard and live happily ever after off his mother's therapy salary?"

I roll my eyes at him.

“Did you at least tell him to meet you in the library for a quick blow job before sixth period?”

“Stop it, Vin.” I punch him in the arm and he yelps. “I don’t even like Chris.”

“You don’t like him, or Ivy didn’t like him?” I let all the rocks fall out of my hand and look away. I want Vin to take it back or pretend I didn’t hear it but he doesn’t and I heard him loud and clear.

“That’s not fair.” My voice is barely a whisper.

“You’re right. It’s not fair that Ivy randomly decided he wasn’t worth your time regardless of your feelings for him.” I shoot him a warning look but that doesn’t stop Vin. “Just because you never had a chance to get Ivy’s overrated approval doesn’t mean you can’t date him.”

“Vin, stop!” He looks taken aback. “I just- I don’t want to talk about this. Ever.”

He sighs. “Fine.” There is an uncomfortable silence between us. We started arguing more after Ivy’s funeral. Vin was very much about letting his feelings out and talking about things and I absolutely was not. He kicks his feet against the brick wall for a while. “How’s Zach?”

I shrug. Ivy had always felt like she was a part of my family, which meant that my older brother was her older brother. Zach took her death hard. It was like he blamed himself. “He was quiet for two weeks. Then he was nice was a while, and now he’s the same old asshole.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want you to feel weird about the way he’s treating you.” Vin always defends Zach. No matter what.

“I wish everyone else felt that way.”

“Your parents still treating you like you’re fragile?”

“Yup. I mean, it’s not as bad anymore. But my mom is constantly calling my phone and asking about every second of my day from the last moment she saw me.”

“I’m just shocked they haven’t hired someone to watch you 24/7.”

“Isn’t that what you’re doing?”

He chuckles a little. “True. Do you think about her often? Even when you’re not doing presentations on suicide?”

I look down at my hand at the ring Ivy bought me when we were 13. It is a sapphire, my birthstone. I got her the same ring but with an emerald stone. They were our birthstones, but they were also our favorite colors. We both decorated our rooms in ocean themes after we got the rings, everything blue and green so it was like we were in the same room. I twist it around on my finger and nod my head slowly. A tear hits my right thigh, and I wipe my eyes. “Remember when we would come up here all the time?”

Vin smiles and looks toward the bridge. “Of course. You two would always start bitching about something. Boys, girls, your periods, homework, the increasing price of marijuana.”

I laugh and lean against his bare arm. “We’d joke about how we were the only people worth knowing.”

“We were kinda full of shit, weren’t we?” He chuckles. I nod in agreement.

I roll the nub around in my fingers, take a hit and then bury it under some rocks. I pick one up and toss it around in my hands. “I used to wish we’d done it together. Held hands and jumped.” Vin just looks at me. “I don’t anymore. Now I’m just reminded that without her there are fewer people in this world who matter.”

A week after Ivy’s death, three kids switched schools. Grief counseling became the most attended after school event. Vin almost started slicing his wrists again, but somehow fought the

urge. It was like the whole school went mad. I know it was more from the fact that someone our age dying and not about Ivy herself, but it was a lot. Everyone waited for me to go crazy too. They were still waiting.

Vin takes my hand, and we look towards the river. "I'm still here." The sun beats down on the back of our necks. Vin stands up. "Okey dokey, let's go. Ivy would hate me if I let you skip classes all day." He reaches his hand down for me to take. I let him pull me up because I want him to know I need him. Before I climb down the ladder, I take the rock in my hand and chuck it off the roof. It hits a car hood and the alarm goes off. I smile at my work. Vin doesn't even look toward the parking lot. "With your luck, that probably hit Principal Gordy's car. Or Chris Boland's."

When the dismissal bell rings, I get a call from my mom, right on schedule. "Hey," I answer, trying to sound chipper.

"How was school?" Her voice carries a tone of worry that she's been using with me since my first week back.

"Fantastic. Just eight more weeks." I sigh into the receiver as I exit the building and walk toward my car.

"And then you graduate, I know. Listen, I need you and Zach to make dinner tonight. I'm stuck at the office. I don't think I'll get home until 8 with this new patient coming in and me picking up your sister from the airport."

I sigh melodramatically into the phone. "I thought Dad was picking Lina up." I open my car door and chuck my backpack across to the passenger seat.

"Nope. Technically, you were supposed to pick her up."

"Oh." I sigh. "Alright, we'll make dinner."

“Thank you.”

I put my head back on the headrest and close my eyes. I listen to the rumble of the buses leaving the lot. I hear my peers enter their cars and zoom away from the school to be with their perfect families. I breathe deeply a couple of times like my therapist taught me. I know I need to get home to tell Zach about dinner and then I have to head over to Vin’s house, but I need this cool down time. After a couple of minutes, I reach for my orange sunglasses and slip them over my eyes. I’m about to shift into reverse when someone knocks on my window and I drop my phone in my shock.

“I almost shit myself. What do you want?” I glare angrily at through my dark lenses at Charlie Bennett.

“Hey. I’m really sorry to bug you, but could I please get a ride home?” Her bright green eyes look earnestly at me.

I let out a long sigh. “Get in.” I shift my backpack to the floor in front of the passenger seat as she eagerly enters my car.

“Thanks so much. I missed my bus and then I don’t know that many people who have a car, but then I saw your car here which was so lucky.” She talks really fast when she’s nervous, which I used to think was funny. Ivy and I competed to see who could talk the fastest, but we could not compare to Charlie.

“No problem.” I start to drive to her house a little faster than I usually drive. I wanted some alone time, but I didn’t want to be a bitch about it. Charlie sits rigid in her seat like she’s afraid I’ll change my mind and drop her on the side of the road if I see her hunch her shoulders once. “Why didn’t Adam give you a ride?” I try to hide the irritation from my voice but it creeps in all the same.

“He, um, had practice.” Charlie looks out the window nervously. I wonder why she’s lying. She’s been hooking up with Adam for months now, which is quite the accomplishment for a sophomore. Adam is a typical idiot lacrosse player who cares about getting laid and sports. He definitely didn’t have practice today because Vin didn’t have practice either, but I didn’t ask questions. I used to be the sophomore who dated seniors and got her heart broken, but now that I was a senior, I was a single pringle. Vin said maybe if I didn’t make it so obvious that I hated everyone, someone would ask me out. But I did hate everyone and I didn’t want to go out with any of the guys at school. I still wished they’d ask so I could say no.

We drive past the Boland’s neighborhood and Charlie grabs onto another opportunity to talk. “You go to Dr. Boland too, right?”

I just nod silently.

“Isn’t Chris a senior?” I nod again. “Is it hard?”

She’s looking at me expectantly, but I don’t know what she’s talking about. Being a senior? Dealing with Ivy? Going to therapy and talking about my day every week because my parents and Dr. Boland think one day I’ll let slip that I too want to fall from a bridge and hit the ground hard so that I can join my best friend?

Charlie is still talking a mile a minute. “Dating your therapist’s son has to be really awkward because does confidentiality ever really exist? Like what if she tells him about you one day on accident? I’m sure she’d use code names or something but he’d know because you two are dating so why wouldn’t he know that she’s talking about you? And then he’d find out that you’re crazy to some extent and he’d try to be understanding, but at some point he wouldn’t be able to handle it. But how awkward is that? You tell your therapist everything, even the intimate

details and so you'd be talking about having sex with your boyfriend, the whole time talking about having sex with her son! I just could not imagine..."

"Charlie!" I cut her off abruptly before she can continue this insane train of thought. "I'm not dating Chris Boland."

"Oh." She sits in silence for a second. "I just figured, from the way he looks at you sometimes and the way you look at him..."

"Well, you're wrong."

I turn into her neighborhood behind the school bus and sigh as it lets off a bunch of freshman at the top of the cul de sac. We sit silently for a bit and then Charlie feels the need to speak again.

"I never got to say sorry about Ivy." She's giving me that pity look Chris gave me during my presentation so I just stare ahead until it's over. I don't understand the need for people to apologize to me even now, months after Ivy killed herself. It's not like we were married and I'm a widow. We were best friends and she left me and that was that. I didn't need the constant pity party from strangers and acquaintances. I got it enough from Vin and my family. I stop in front of her house and fake a smile.

"Bye." She leans over and gives me the most awkward in-the-car side-hug I've ever received and shuts the door behind her as she runs inside. I speed off for home remembering dinner.

I open the front door to my house and throw my backpack to the side. "Hello," I call out. "Barf, are you home?"

My brother emerges from the kitchen in his boxers and his favorite red t-shirt. I'm pretty sure it hasn't been washed in a month. "When are you gonna stop calling me that?"

“When you stop smelling awful. What have you been doing all day? Wiping your sweat all around the house?”

Zach ignores me and grabs the grocery bags in my hand. “Are we making dinner again?”

“If by we, you mean you, then yes.” I follow him into the kitchen and check the mail on the counter. At least he picked up the mail today. I watch him take the things out of grocery bags and put them on the counters. He actually looks like a real member of society right now, not like someone who dropped out of university and was barely attending the community college 10 minutes from our house. He catches my eyes and stops moving.

“What?” He has a thing against people watching him cook.

“Did you go to class today?”

“No.” He shrugs and keeps grabbing pots and pans out of the cabinets. The kitchen is his realm and I am just a spectator. I don’t think our mom knows how much he does around the house. I should probably tell her, but if they knew how much Zach did, they’d expect more from him. I stand up and walk over to the counter, thinking I should help him.

“Why not?” I stand close to his side waiting for him to give me some sort of instruction. Not like a shadow, more like a wax statue doing absolutely nothing of substance.

“Because I didn’t feel like it. Are you going to stand there the whole time I’m cooking?”

I sigh and move away from him. “I’m gonna go to my friend’s house.”

“You can say Vin. You don’t have many friends.”

“That is a personal choice because everyone sucks.”

Zach chuckles as I grab my keys and leave.

Three hours later, I'm lying on Vin's bed while he searches desperately for something to wear.

"Where are you going again?" I have to shout over the music he's blasting from his computer.

"I'm meeting Tonya's new boyfriend." His mom is going out with a new guy and felt the need for Vin to meet him. Which meant it was pretty serious. I couldn't tell if Vin was okay with it. He walked out of the closet clutching a bright salmon button down and grey pants. "How's this?"

I sit up and give him a hard look. "Are you a frat boy?"

He rolls his eyes. "That's a no from you." He turns to his dog, and holds them up. "How about you Paisley?" She turns and runs out of the room. "That's two no's." He walks back into the closet and starts rummaging around.

"Where are you guys going?"

"That Brazilian steak house in town." He walks back out holding a light blue button down and dark tan pants.

"What tie are you wearing?"

"The maroon one." He grabs his tie off the desk and holds it up.

"I think we've found the outfit."

He just stands there. "You realize I brought out this exact thing when we started?"

"It's closer to night so now it looks nicer."

"You're so full of shit."

"I know." He throws the clothes at me and goes back into the closet.

"Now I just have to find those brown loafers and I'm good."

As he starts rummaging around his closet, I take a tour of his desk. He keeps a small record player on his desk and his tiny record collection behind it. The record player was a gift from Ivy and me last year. Now every holiday I got him a new record to add. Next to the player is a stack of books. Some for school, some for fun. Vin was planning on majoring in English Lit in college. Something I condoned, but his parents had a little trouble with. They constantly asked him if he'd think about something more practical like medicine. Vin was brilliant, but he just hated science. He took all the AP courses and exams so he would be exempt from science in college. I stop at a medium sized jar decorated with stickers and painted red, his favorite color.

“What’s this?”

He walks out of the closet to see what I’m talking about. He pauses with an uncomfortable look. “It’s nothing.” He walks over and tries to grab it but I pick it up before he can.

“What’s in it?” I can’t see inside but it looks like only a couple of things are inside.

“It’s just some stuff. Give it back, Olive.” He struggles with me for a second but I get away and open the jar. Inside I see a familiar green envelope, a bracelet, and a small rock. Vin looks at me sympathetically.

“Is this the letter?” He nods.

The day after Ivy died, Vin found that envelope in his car. He’d been over at my house and was on his way home when it fell out of the visor. He said it was a letter from Ivy saying she loved him and some other stuff. We didn’t know when she slipped it in his car but there it was. A week later, Zach found one in his old jacket that Ivy used to wear. I searched my car, my room, my whole house, my locker at school, but I never found anything.

Vin calmly takes the jar and puts the lid back on. “Are you okay?”

I nod slowly. My phone starts to ring. It's probably my mom asking about dinner or something, but I let it go to voicemail.

"Olive?" I am still staring at the jar in his hands. "Maybe you just haven't found yours yet."

"It's been five fucking months, Vin."

"Don't get mad at me, Olive. I don't know why you didn't get one. I helped you look and that's all I can do."

"Whatever. I have to go home." I grab my things and head for the door.

"Olive..."

"I hope dinner sucks." I slam the door behind me.

Instead of going straight home I decide to drive around for a bit to cool down. Before I know it, I'm outside of Ivy's old house. Her mom moved a couple of months ago. She'd been in the process of moving to a smaller home when she died and after that, she had a little bit of trouble giving up the house. In the end, she said it was just too hard to stay in that big, empty house alone. I park in the street in front of the house and walk into the backyard. I sit on the dingy yellow swing and it creaks as I put my weight on it. I used to love coming to Ivy's house and playing on this swing set. When her dad died, she started coming to my house more often. We were in seventh grade when it happened. Ivy and her dad hadn't been too close, she fought with him all the time about boys and curfew and her clothes and everything, but he was still her dad. I feel myself start to cry out of frustration. What could Ivy possibly have to say to everyone else in the fucking world that she didn't want to say to me post-mortem? I never read Vin or Zach's letters. As far as I was concerned they were an abomination. A crater in my memory of

Ivy. I wipe my eyes and walk back to my car, finished with this reminder that I didn't know everything there would ever be to know about Ivy.

I got home right before Lina and Mom got in. Mom thanked me for dinner and I didn't correct her in front of Zach. Dad was home for a total of three hours before he and Mom were on-call at the hospital. I was sure he would be home more over the weekend. They both liked to take some time off when Lina was home. I would think it'd be the other way around, Lina's presence reminding them that they had three kids all in need of college tuition. Well, two kids in need of tuition.

After dinner, I run up to my room. I don't really feel up for much family bonding tonight. It'd been an emotional day and I was in need some time alone. After I hear my parents leave and the house quiets down, I decide I deserve some roof time. I reach into my desk drawer for my emergency bowl, but it's not there. I look out the big window that faces the backyard. I grab Ivy's old lighter and crawl out my window onto the deck roof.

"Oh yeah, I stole your bowl if you don't mind," Zach says over the wind. "Lina didn't bring much." Lina punches Zach in the shoulder.

"I flew in. You can't bring that shit in your carry on."

I let out a loud sigh and sit down next to them. There are two bags of chips between them. I grab the bowl from Zach and take a hit. "I see dinner was satisfying for both of you."

"It was. We just got a little hungry."

I lean back against the cool shingles and watch Zach take another hit. His jaw is locked and in the moonlight I can tell he's biting the inside of his cheek, which he only does when he's

stressed or about to cry. I'm about to when Lina leans back so she can face me. She smiles her perfectly white smile. "Hey." I manage a closed smile.

"Hi."

"You were really quiet at dinner."

"It's been a long day."

Lina just looks at me. It's not the same pitiful look I get from people at school. This one is sweeter. She looks at me like she knows I'll be fine even if I'm not so sure I will be. Zach leans back, breaking our gaze.

"It's not like you had to cook." Lina hits him for me and we all giggle. I sit up and look at the stars.

"Why are you two even out here?" They are both silent for a second and I grab the unopened bag of cheese puffs. It's like they knew I'd be out here eventually so they brought my favorite snack. Underneath the bag I see the small green envelope and I stop cold.

Lina sits up first and grabs the letter. "We just thought it was time to read it."

I am silent for a while. Zach sits up and takes the letter back from Lina.

"What's it say?" I close the bag of cheese puffs, suddenly not hungry at all.

"I haven't read it yet." Zach is speaking quietly and gently. The same way he spoke to me after Ivy died. I hate his delicate voice. It makes me feel more fragile than I want to admit to being. "Do you want to read it with me?"

"Absolutely not." I brush my hands on my sweats and head for my window.

"Come on, Liv," Lina calls after me. I keep moving and crawl through my window, shutting it behind me. I lay on my bed unable to cry.

I try to accept the fact that I never got a letter from Ivy; never read her apology, never got any last memo from my best friend since we were three. I am angry. Betrayed. Jealous. Jilted by her death. She didn't take me with her, and now I find out she didn't even have anything to say to me before she left me. Left me at school with all those people who didn't get it. Stupid girls with padded bras crying because a girl who spent most of her time making fun of them had killed herself. Assholes who made jokes and memes about how Ivy hit the ground pretty hard for a skinny chick. These terrible people who don't or can't care about anything. I'm mad because without Ivy, I'm becoming one of them. I don't care because I don't know what to care about. I hate not knowing if I should care. I hate not having Ivy to care about things with me, or for me, or whatever. I don't even know what a letter from her would say or could say to make me less angry. I'll always be angry. I'll always feel empty.

I curl in a ball on my bed on top of the covers. Lina crawls into my window and lies down next to me on my bed. I feel the bed shift as her head hits the pillow and she puts her hand on my shoulder.

"I'm not crying."

"I know."

In the morning, I am greeted with the smell of bacon coming up the stairs from the kitchen. I walk into the kitchen and see Lina standing at the stove wearing one of my sweatshirts. I wonder why everyone in my family was blessed with the ability to cook while I struggled to make one bowl of cereal that wasn't disgustingly soggy.

"Good morning, sunshine." I look into the living room and see Vin sitting on the couch next to Zach. They are playing video games.

“What are you doing here so early?”

“He came to see me,” Lina says from the stove. I shuffle over to the armchair in the corner of the living room and sit down silently for a while.

“Where are Mom and Dad?” I’m regretting the choice to not make myself a cup of coffee before sitting down. I am too comfortable to get up now.

“They got back from work and then went to brunch at their friend’s house.” Zach answers quickly without looking away from the screen.

Vin chimes in. “Tonya is also with them.”

I shrug and check the time on my phone. It’s 11:15 a.m. and I only have 45 minutes before my weekly meeting with Dr. Boland. I consider skipping it, but I know Lina won’t let me.

As if reading my mind, Lina calls out from the kitchen, “Don’t you have to be at Dr. Boland’s office soon, Olive?”

“No.” She gives me a look as she puts the bacon in a plate and makes herself some toast. I mend my statement. “Not *soon*. I have until noon.”

I get out of the chair and go into the kitchen to eat something before I’m forced to cope.

“So how was your presentation?” I’ve avoided talking about that for over half an hour, but I should have known that she’d ask.

“It was fine.” I try to feign an air of nonchalance about it, but it sounds forced and I immediately cringe at the sound of my voice.

“I heard you left rather abruptly.” Chris is such a little rat. “Your teacher emailed me yesterday.” Okay. So maybe it wasn’t him.

“Yeah.”

“Why did you leave?”

“No one was paying attention and I was over it.” Dr. Boland can tell from my voice that I don’t want to talk about this, and I don’t. But I don’t want the conversation to move to other things because I can’t handle talking about those right now.

She nods her head slowly.

“Lina’s in town.” I try to sound chipper.

Dr. Boland smiles. “I know. You told me when you came in.”

“Oh. Right.” I search my mind for something else to talk about, but Dr. Boland’s gaze makes it that much harder to think of something.

“Olive.” I turn to her, expectantly. “If you want to end our session early today, that’s fine. You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to.”

I try to sit up fast enough that she can’t guilt me into talking, but slow enough that I don’t seem to eager to leave. I like Dr. Boland. She’s been great to me. I just don’t know if I want to talk about the letters today. Or ever. I smile at her as I leave, constantly giving off the illusion that I’m fine, even to the people who know I’m not.

I get back into my car regretting my decision not to talk to Dr. Boland about the letters. All I can think about as I put my car into drive is Ivy. Ivy and those stupid letters. Fourteen years of friendship was all we would get. But I wanted more. I wanted to know that she cared about me. I know there is so much more to depression and suicide, and one friend can’t change that, but if anyone should have an explanation for everything, it should have been me. Not my idiot brother, not Lina, not even Vin. I loved him but I deserved a letter more than he did. I’d been by her side for so long, only doing things on her time, only liking boys she approved of.

I drive towards my house and make a last minute sharp right on Dr. Boland's street. I pull up to her house, knowing she's not home and bang on the front door. Chris answers the door looking rightfully confused.

"Hey, Olive. My mom's not--"

I cut him off before he tries and fails to rationalize this visit. "I know." I ran all the way to the door and the swift movements seem to have clouded my mission. Chris offers no lifeline, just stands in the doorway squinting at me. After an uncomfortable silence, I regain my composure.

"Do you want to go on a drive?"

He looks at me for a minute. "Where to?"

"I'm not sure yet."

He shrugs and backs away from the door. "Sure." He still sounds unconvinced. "Let me go grab some stuff and I'll be out."

I nod and go back to my car. I grip the steering wheel hard, hoping it will tell me where I am supposed to take Chris Boland on this adventure my messed up mind is taking us on. He comes out of the house pretty quickly, putting his arms through his drawstring backpack as he strolls over to the passenger side. He swipes his dark hair to the side as he gets into the car.

"Figure out where we're going yet?" He smiles at me. Like this isn't the weirdest duo to ever exist in our lives.

I shake my head slowly. "Nope." I put my sunglasses on and peel out of the neighborhood.

For some reason, I take Chris to the bridge. I park the car close by and get out without saying a word to him. The wind is whipping my hair back and forth and I put it in a ponytail and then face the bridge. Chris gets out of the car slowly and follows my gaze.

“Olive,” he starts to say something, but I start walking toward the bridge, hoping he’ll follow. He grabs his backpack and shuts the door to the car, jogging to keep up with me.

We walk to the bridge silently, although Chris keeps looking at me like he wants to say something. Ask some questions, but I don’t know what I would say if he asked me why we’re going to the bridge, or what I wanted to do when we got to the bridge.

Before the bridge, I turn towards the footbridge near the beginning of the bridge and crawl between the poles to get to the hill beside it. I turn around and Chris is standing by the poles contemplating something.

“Come on!”

“Where are we going?”

“Just down by the rocks.”

Chris sighs and crawls through the poles, slowly maneuvering his way down the hillside to meet me. I move down to the bank of rocks and sit down. After what sounds like a struggle, he sits down next to me.

“What is going on?”

“I don’t know.” He looks at me, waiting for more.

“You aren’t thinking of jumping are you?”

I glare at him, but his face shows genuine concern. I shake my head no. I pick up a small rock next to me and toss it into the water. He picks one up and skips it across three times.

“Did you know that Ivy and I had been best friends since we were three years old?” I throw another rock.

Chris nods slowly, taking in this random information I’ve chosen to share with him. “That’s a long time.”

I nod back vehemently. “It is. We did everything together. Ever since we were three years old, Ivy was like my twin sister. One time, we tried to become blood sisters, but I freaked out at the smallest paper cut, so we did a spit handshake instead. It was her idea. She always knew how to fix things and how to make me feel better. She taught me how to put on makeup and she made me take piano lessons in fourth grade and she introduced me to Vin. She even told me who I should talk to, who I should date. She had all the ideas and all the creativity and even though I should have felt like the ugly duckling best friend, I didn’t.”

“Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because my whole life I thought Ivy had all the answers, and she didn’t. She had no answers. I have done everything she ever wanted me to, and I have nothing to show for it. Now she’s gone and…” I stop to pay attention to Chris. He started digging around in his backpack in the middle of my tirade and now he’s holding an envelope out to me.

“What is that?”

“Open it.”

I take the envelope tentatively, the past five months swirling through my mind. It’s a tan envelope with a bunch of waves drawn all over it. It immediately looks familiar, and I realize that the blue and green ocean drawn on the envelope is something Ivy used to draw me all the time. I open the envelope slowly and my breath catches when I see my name written in Ivy’s loopy handwriting across the back of the stationary.

“Where did you get this?” My voice is barely a whisper.

“Ivy gave it to me.” I wait for more of an explanation. “She gave it to me a couple of days before she died. She said I should give it to you, but I should wait until you talked to me.”

All of a sudden, I am angry. “Why did you wait so long? It’s been five months, dammit! I practically went crazy looking for this! Didn’t you know?”

Chris stares into my eyes. “Why would I know that? You don’t talk to me. At all.”

“Oh.” I stare at the water and put the letter back into the envelope.

“Aren’t you gonna read it?”

I think about it. “Not yet. I don’t know if I’m ready.”

Chris nods and looks up at the bridge. I look at the side of his face for a while, taking in his strong jaw and the small hairs on his chin. I lean back, my head hitting the grass, and sigh. I look up and see the clouds pass behind the bridge, thinking about Ivy and Chris and Vin and jumping off bridges and letters. My hands fiddle with the flap of the envelope and Chris reaches over and touches my hands. I look at him and he shakes his head.

“Not yet. Remember?” He smiles and leans back next to me, both of us listening to the traffic pass by, everyone passing by with their own agendas, paying no attention to a girl and a boy lying by the rocks down below, or a girl flying down from the bridge.

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